

GRAB YOUR UMBRELLA, IT'S ABOUT TO RAIN MEN

Upcoming queer guy gathering offers a refreshing twist to HIV prevention and building community by Inga Sorensen

OK guys, what do you look for in a man?

Is it his sweet or sly smile, or the gentle or commanding tone of his voice? Is it the way he coos or talks dirty? Want a he-jock, a fellow steeped in bookish charm, or a man who opts for Birkenstocks above all other footwear?

Should your guy possess a particular edginess, or do you lean toward mellow? Eager to settle down, or enjoy shopping around?

Oh yeah, where do you find a date anyway? And if you're not in the market for an intimate partner, where do you find some fun guys just to hang with?

A bunch of gay guys—yes, that's the formal name—is looking to give Portland-area queer men a chance to communally chew the dating-dilemma fat via an "interactive, multimedia spring fling get-together for gay men" entitled *It's Raining Men*.

The April 18 shindig, to be hosted by Rose City personalities Poison Waters and Stephen Michael Rondel, will feature a gay guy version of *The Dating Game* as well as a roving microphone to capture audience insights into "exploring the perils and promises of meeting and dating gay men in Portland."

Over the past few weeks, a video crew has been scouring the city asking queer guys dating-related questions, and snippets of those "gay man on the street" interviews will pepper the evening in an event organizers are dubbing *Drag Meets Oprah*.

"Hopefully this will be an opportunity to bring lots of gay and bi men together and begin to build a sense of community," says bunch member Alan Rose. "That really hasn't happened here."

Look north and you'll find one place where it has been happening for the past few years.

John Leonard, 36, is the founder and executive director of Gay City Health Project, an innovative Seattle-based HIV prevention program that blends common-sense philosophy with cutting-edge tactics and theatrics in hopes of extinguishing the spread of HIV among gay and bisexual men.

Two years ago, Gay City sponsored *Manhunt '96* which attracted 300 queer guys who shared tips on dating etiquette, as well as advice about negotiating sex and other potentially touchy stuff.

"When we started out, we had no idea what the response was going to be," he tells *Just Out*,

explaining Gay City essentially grew from a January 1994 gathering called *Why Are Fags Fucking Without Condoms?*, which Leonard organized along with the Gay Men's AIDS Prevention Task Force, a grass-roots coalition that was advising the Seattle/King County Health Department on HIV and AIDS.

Why Are Fags Fucking Without Condoms? drew a standing-room-only crowd of 300-plus queer men and clearly tapped into an unmet need by speaking to them—rather than at them—and fostering a sense of community which had been sorely lacking.



Stephen Cassel films while Kevin Cooke (a k a Poison Waters) interviews Roger Schroeder

Other extremely popular forums followed, tackling equally sensitive topics in a colorful manner—*Is Sucking Safe?* and *Positives and Negatives: Can We Get Along?*, for example.

Syndicated advice columnist Dan Savage, appearing in drag to act as master of ceremonies, has become a Gay City mainstay, and queer celebs like author Michelangelo Signorile have made appearances.

Something significant was brewing. After years of being pelted with benign HIV/AIDS prevention materials that packed as much punch as Nancy Reagan's *Just Say No* anti-drug campaign, Gay City was giving many gay and bi men what they seemed to want: candid talk about sex and relationships, self-worth, homo-

phobia, body image and community—basically anything they wanted to take on.

It remains a fresh approach to HIV prevention, and apparently a much-needed one, given that many men still continue to engage in high-risk behaviors nearly two decades into the AIDS pandemic.

Researchers have repeatedly found neither the reality of thousands of AIDS-related deaths nor numerous safer-sex campaigns have deterred large numbers of men from engaging in risky sex acts.

Gay City, however, has swapped preachy lec-

mean?" laughs Bateman, a member of Portland's fledgling bunch.

He adds, "I was a little freaked, but there was so much energy. I remember thinking, 'This is what they mean by gay community.'"

So successful has Gay City been that it recently received a three-year \$600,000 grant from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to support program expansion.

"I'm getting calls from across the country from people wanting to know how it works and how they might be able to do it in their communities," Leonard says. "It's pretty amazing."

While *It's Raining Men* is modeled after Gay City forums, Alan Rose says it will not be an exact replica.

"We want it to have a Portland flavor, because, after all, that's who this is for," he says. Hence the installation of local personalities as hosts.

The goals, however, match up pretty well: create a sense of community among queer men, promote their well-being, and hopefully slash the rate of HIV transmission.

According to Rose, his employer, Cascade AIDS Project, has given \$2,500 to bolster *It's Raining Men*. A handful of groups and businesses are also sponsoring the event.

However Rose wants to make it very clear this is not an organizational event. (Read: Too much history and too much politicking have made for some yucky feelings.)

"It's a bunch of gay guys who want to do some good," he says, adding that organizers are working to attract a potpourri of men—older, younger, men of color, interracial couples, men who may have never previously been involved in community activities.

Robert E. Wright, project coordinator for Brother to Brother, a group for African-American gay and bisexual men, is also among the bunch.

"When concerns around inclusivity and cultural sensitivity have been brought up, they have been addressed," he says. "It has been a satisfying experience so far."

Wright adds he hopes *It's Raining Men* is a hit: "I think we all lose when we isolate ourselves."

■ **IT'S RAINING MEN**, the first in a series of local prosocial gay men's events, will be held Saturday, April 18, from 7 to 9 pm at Hawthorne Rhapsody, 3862 SE Hawthorne Blvd. in Portland. Suggested donation is \$2. For more information, call Alan Rose at 223-5907, ext 107.

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